

'WELCOME HOME!' Shouts the once heartbroken father of the home-again prodigal he perceives in the distance, slouching his way home from the pig pen and the prostitutes.

'WELCOME HOME!' Cries the newly hopeful father of the one he thought was dead, from dissolving his life savings in 'dissolute living' and disastrous self-care.

'WELCOME HOME!' Sobs the eternally compassionate father of the child who has slogged his way through the muck and the mud of the mis-adventures of his own making, finally 'coming home to himself,' so he can now come home to his God.

Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home, says our God.

And for a brief moment all is right with the world.

And we have a really great party.

It is how the church should be, don't you think? Following in the footsteps of Jesus through this parable of the prodigal. And the God who will go to whatever lengths it takes to welcome home in steadfast hope, with everlasting arms that can handle the heat, every single beloved child willing to leap into them.

It's how some churches already are. Including, we hope, this one.

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Community in Daytona Beach, Florida, puts it this way, right in the middle of their bulletin:

*We extend a special welcome, they say, to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no habla [sic] ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds.*

*We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or (and this is my favorite) like our pastor who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up, or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope (or for us more Presbyterian than Dan and Laura Rogers) or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism.*

*We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, or you're down in the dumps, or if you don't like "organized religion," we've been there, too.*

*If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.*

*We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts, and you!*

You are welcome, says Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church.

Welcome home, says the beloved father of the prodigal.

And a party is prepared. And we all live together. Happily ever after . . .

At least that is how it is supposed to be.

At least that is how it is with Jesus, in the prelude to the parable, when the narrator of Luke's Gospel tells us that 'all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.'

Alas, the First Century version of the Committee on Ministry is none too happy about it. 'This fellow welcomes sinners' they shout in horror. 'He even eats with them!' they whisper. With a tsk tsk of the wagging finger. And a warning that *this* sacrament of communion is NOT 'rightly administered.'

And the older brother joins them in a jealous rant, in the story Jesus tells. And perhaps rightly so, we could confess. Because why *didn't* the father ever throw a party for the one who did not wander?

Is he not, also, 'beloved'?

The truth is, most of us in the church tend to be like the older brother, to varying degrees. Pretty decent people, by and large. Living pretty decent lives. Decently and in order. Expected to do the right thing. And doing it. With no great big party to welcome us home.

And maybe the father *has* been remiss in his praise.

So I say:

'WELCOME HOME!' you who love your spouse, and care for your kids, and labor with dignity, and pinch your pennies, and pay your taxes, and serve on the session, and visit the sick, and brew the coffee . . .

'WELCOME HOME!' you who fix meals for Joseph's House, and help new immigrants with their massive paperwork, and organize fundraisers, and study hard, and just plain give all you can from the moment you get up in the morning to the moment you hit the sheets at night.

'Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home,' says our God.

‘Everything that is mine, is yours.’ This party is most certainly for you, as well.

But not, I must add, because of all those good things you have done.

Simply because of who you are: my beloved child. Even though you did not wander . . .

We never do find out, in the parable of the prodigal and his brother, if the one who does not wander finds his way home, too.

The story leaves us hanging. Out in the field. With another lost brother. And a father chasing after him. Begging him to come home, too.

And the ending is left up to us . . .

If the older brother is going to be part of the family, he is going to have to open himself to the muck and the mud of the pigpen and the prostitute that have been his younger brother’s pilgrimage. He is going to have to open his heart and his mind and his spirit to an entirely unknown world. A world he judges harshly. And from which he protects himself carefully.

And then ‘come to himself.’ By *losing* himself. The same way his younger brother did . . .

This is the journey of faith, in the end. For those of us in the church and for those of us beyond. To walk in the way of the one who wanders. And learn from them what it is to hunger for home. Whether we stay in our pews or venture to the tattoo parlor across the street. With nothing left in our hands but a desire for communion with the one who has lived through the muck and the mud. In order to find ourselves again.

So go, in the spirit of the pilgrim, seeking the wisdom of God in the world beyond these walls . . .

Go, in the trust that nothing can separate you from the steadfast love of God . . .

Go, in the muck and mud of the pigpen and the prostitute of our own inner city, or the inside of our souls, and learn from those who are lost, what it is to come home. And come back with them. Forever changed. Because you met God there, even more, perhaps, than you ever did in here . . .

That is our invitation. That is our journey. That is, I might even say, our command, from this lesson from our Scripture today.

And so I pray it may be so.

Amen.